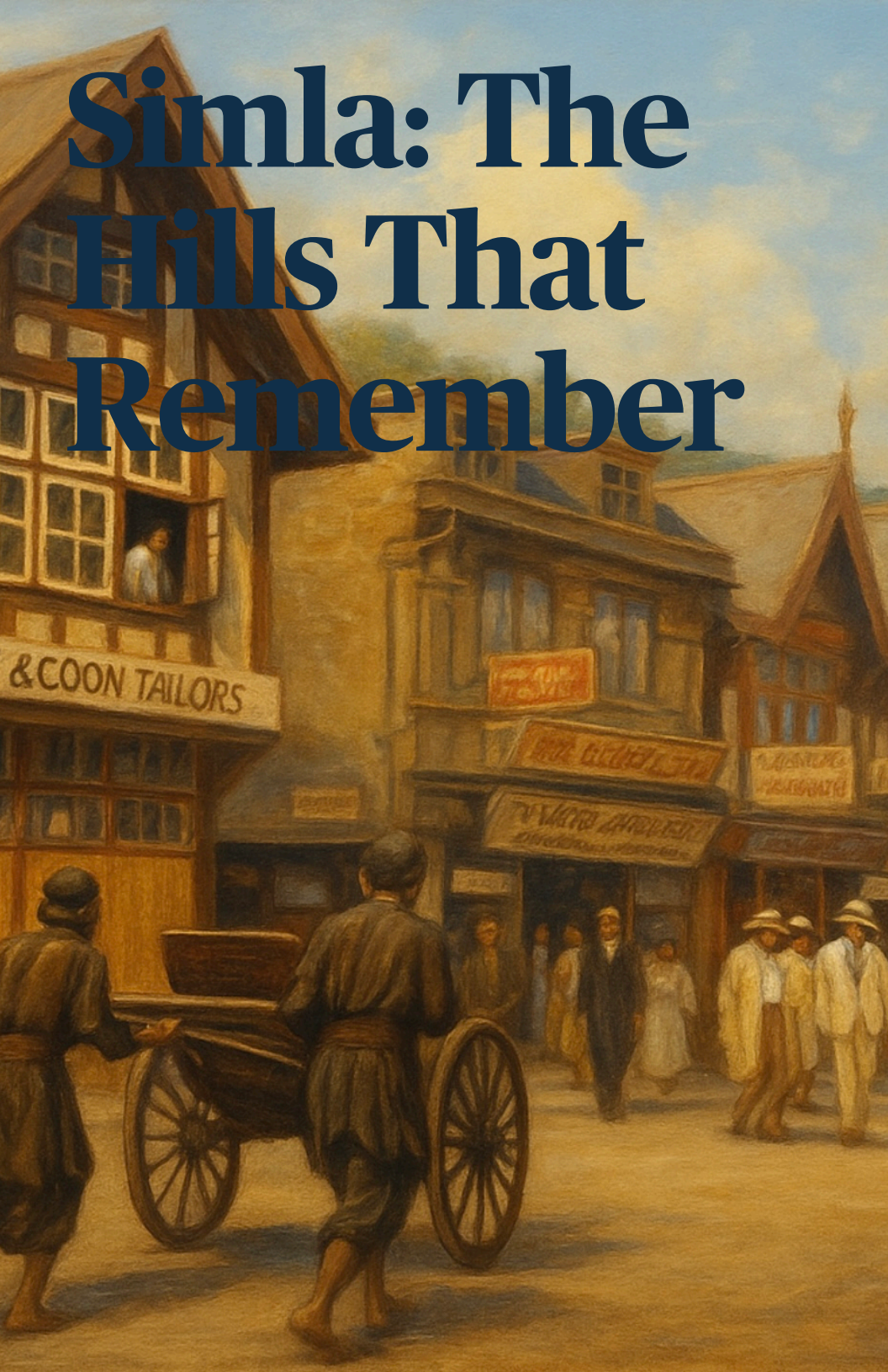
Simla: The Hills That Remember



Simla: The Hills That Remember

Simla Hills
Himachal Pradesh
Summer 2025

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Prologue: The Wind Knows

Somewhere above the bazaar, before the story begins.

The clouds don't merely descend upon this hill—they return to it, as if called back by something older than weather. You can almost hear it if you listen long enough: the low chant of mist brushing against the deodar branches, the silent hum of time folded into bark, into stone, into the air itself. This is not arrival. It is recollection.

Beneath the hush, far below, the town wakes. Honking horns argue with the rain. Steam rises from kettles. A school bell rings and is swallowed by fog. But up here—on the quiet slope on Forest Road, or perhaps in a room that only appears when you are ready—something else is happening. The mountain exhales.

You sit, armchair-bound, not quite a tourist, not quite a pilgrim. You did not climb here for answers, and yet here you are, tasting something just beyond language. The rain speaks in broken tongues. A bird calls once, then falls silent. You remember a story someone told you long ago, but not the ending. Perhaps there never was one.

They say the gods once walked these paths disguised as wind and thunder. Hidimba, Behangamani, and the hill spirits whose names have worn away like old brass—some say they never left. They merely stepped sideways. Into the forest. Into the mist. Into waiting.

Now, the gods stir in their sleep. Now, the hill leans in to listen.

And you—no longer seeking, no longer resisting—simply sit. No mantra rises. No vow binds. A hand unclenches. A tear dries before it falls. A flame does not consume. The bird sings again—not for sorrow, not for joy, but because it is morning.

You do not leave the world. You are left by it. And what remains is stillness. The mountain sits. The wind passes through it. And in the clearing between breath and memory, you begin.

What is a Receipt? (And Why This Hill Watches)

Hello.

You might think you know the story of Simla.

Perhaps you've seen the old photographs: parasols and petticoats, starched collars and moustachioed men on manicured lawns. Perhaps you've read of viceroys in summer exile, or wandered through tales where Simla stood in as a cooler, cleaner, quieter echo of England. That's a story, yes. One version. The kind that makes it into textbooks and tourist brochures. The kind that glints like polished brass but rarely rings true.

This book isn't just about that story.

It is a gathering of receipts.

Not the kind folded into wallets, or stamped at cash registers—though money, contracts, and transactions are everywhere in this tale. No, these are deeper receipts. Layered ones. They record exchanges far older and more intimate: of land for allegiance, of silence for survival, of worship for water, of betrayal for bread. They are stories disguised as documents, memories that rustle beneath policy, and truths etched not just in ink but in scar tissue and song.

A receipt, in this telling, is proof of presence. Of cost. Of witness.

Each chapter you read will be one such receipt: an unveiling, a counterpoint, a moment when the past calls out from beneath the official story. Some are written in myth and mist. Some come from archives, others from whispers in bazaars. Some are sharp with irony, others softened by longing. But all of them come from this hill. This land. This strange, echoing stage where empire danced, and where the mountains watched in silence.

We will begin not with conquest, but with memory. With the gods who crowned kings, and the villages who questioned them. With a justice system that involved trance and thunder, and with trade routes that wound like veins through snow passes long before the British drew their neat lines.

We'll meet the Ledgermen—masters of arithmetic and ambiguity—who learned to serve two empires at once. We'll

hear from the coolies and ayahs whose bodies bore the burden of empire, and from the rickshaw wallah whose death sparked sacred rebellion. We'll witness how even the gods awakened when the hill was wounded, and how a single ritual—the dum—could shake a district like a monsoon storm.

We'll also follow the Rajas as they bent their backs beneath velvet and crown, caught between tradition and treaty. We'll arrive at the transfer of power, and ask: what was truly transferred, and what merely continued under new names?

And finally, we will return to this hill as it is now: fractured, fragrant, haunted, and very much alive.

Because this hill watched it all. It watched the treaties and betrayals. It heard the click of surveyor's boots and the crack of coolie bones. It remembers the forest before the road. And when you sit still enough—still like the deodar, still like stone—you may feel the memory rising through your spine. A whisper, not of history, but of reckoning.

This is not history from above.
This is history from the earth.
From the mist.
From the wound.
From the living memory of the mountain.
So then. Let us begin.
Receipt by receipt.
Layer by layer.
Toward the Still Point.
Where nothing is forgotten.

And nothing, not even silence, is ever truly still.

1

The Gods Who Crowned Kings

In which we recall a time when mountains chose their own, and the thread of sovereignty ran through temple and trade alike.

There was a time, not so long ago, when the thread held.
Before maps sliced mountains into manageable units.
Before the Empire's rails taught the hills to run on clockwork time.
Before the bells of Christ Church rang out over ridge and ravine like iron hymns of order.
There was another rhythm.
Another way of weaving power.

It was the rhythm of altars and goat tracks, of temple fairs and solstice fires. It was the order of mist and memory, of gods who had once been men, and of men who—under starlight, through penance or pact—could become something more.

And always, somewhere in the pattern, there was the thread.
A red cotton thread tied at shrines.

A ledger thread binding valleys in trade.
A thread wrapped around the wrists of kings.
Not for ornament, but for obligation.
Not as a claim to power—but as its condition.

Where the Forest Knew Their Names

Long before Simla called itself queen of the hills, the deodar forests whispered their own coronations.

In the upper Beas Valley, they still chant the name of Hidimba—once demoness, now goddess—who lived in the thunderous folds of Rohtang. Her eyes were the colour of heated copper; her voice rumbled like slate dragged over stone. When Bhim, Pandava prince and exile, met her in the forests, she did not bow. She challenged him.

They say she bested him in strength.
They say she loved him.
They say she bore his son and stayed behind, mountain-bound.

From that union—part man, part asura—descended rulers of Kulu, whose legitimacy was not won in conquest but conferred by covenant. To this day, in Dussehra processions that outshine even royal pageantry, the gods still ride in palanquins, deciding disputes, affirming alliances.

And if the gods do not approve, no pact shall hold.

The Old Woman Who Grew Tall

There is a tale retold each year at the Mela of Banjar, when goat traders and weavers gather under blue tarpaulins and apricot trees heavy with fruit.

It is the tale of Behangamani, a nameless prince who helped an old woman hobble uphill toward the fair. Halfway there, she stopped. She straightened. Her back unbent. Her eyes flashed lightning. Her feet no longer touched the earth.

“I choose you,” she said.

She was Hidimba. She was goddess.
And in that moment, a pact was sewn—between the divine and the wandering, between mercy and sovereignty. Behangamani rose, rallied a people, and ruled not by mandate, but by recognition.

Such were the origins of power in these hills: given, not taken.

The King Who Ate Worms

Not all who wore the thread honoured it. And when it frayed, retribution came swift and strange.

Jagat Singh of Kulu lusted for the jewels of a Brahmin—said to be sacred, cursed, or both. The Brahmin refused. Fire broke out in his home. Ash and silence remained.

Soon after, the king's meals curdled. Milk turned sour in his cup. Worms crawled from his bread. Physicians failed. Priests despaired.

To lift the curse, Jagat Singh went to Ayodhya, returned with Raghunath, god-king Rama in idol form. He placed the deity on his throne and declared himself merely chowkidar, the divine's servant.

And so Kulu passed not into the hands of empire, but into the hands of the god.

Even kings had to atone.

Of Fairs, Offerings, and Ledgers

Every spring and autumn, as snow receded and the mountain passes opened, the hills came alive with movement.

Shepherds from Lahaul descended with yak wool and dried apricots. Traders from Kangra brought indigo and glass bangles. Weavers from the Sutlej basin came with hand-spun cotton.

The great Melas of Sarahan, Rampur, and Chindi were not mere spectacles—they were economic engines. But they were also sacral gatherings. Deals were struck beneath the gaze of gods. Each temple courtyard became a marketplace. Each transaction bore witness.

In Sarahan, the temple of Bhima Kali overlooked every fair. No trader dared cheat within her shadow. A dispute unresolved by barter would be taken to the priest, then to the oracle. A guilty man risked divine wrath.

Here, economy and cosmology danced together.
The gods did not merely crown kings—they blessed commerce, regulated exchange, and remembered what was owed.

The Salt Trader of Saryanj

There was once a man named Rattan Dass, who traded salt along mule tracks between Spiti and Rampur.

Each spring, he rose before the sun, wrapped his ledgers in oilskin, and loaded his mules with coarse Tibetan salt. Each bag was marked with temple-blessed thread—a prayer against theft, spoilage, or deception.

At the fairs, he did not haggle on the temple threshold. He would greet the goddess first, light a lamp, offer salt on stone. Only then did the bargaining begin.

One year, he broke his vow—cut corners, misweighed. That night, a mule stumbled on the trail. The load was lost. He returned with bloodied feet and trembling hands.

He walked to the Shani temple, alone. Tied a black thread. Laid down the salt he had left. He never cheated again.

The Dum: A Sacred Audit

But it was not only kings who answered to the gods. The people, too, had their thread of reckoning.

When rulers taxed too heavily, demanded unpaid labor—begar—or trespassed on temple lands, the people declared a dum.

Shops shuttered. Fields fell silent. No offerings were made. No services performed. A great stillness swept the land. It was not protest. It was refusal. A withdrawal of consent both social and spiritual.

The dum was declared before the gods. Oaths were made in their presence. If the ruler relented, trust might be rewoven. If not, the land itself withheld its blessing.

No army could march on an empty stomach. No king could reign when even the priests turned their faces.

Echoes in the Stone

So it was that sovereignty in these hills remained not just a matter of power, but of alignment.

Thread by thread, pact by pact, a world was woven—one where gods chose kings, traders sought blessing, and the people could unmake a throne with silence.

But the thread would not hold forever.
Soon would come roads without ritual.
Taxation without appeasement.
Ledgers without sacrifice.
And a new god—the Surveyor's Theodolite—would rise on the ridge-lines.

But before that rupture, before the enumeration of souls and soil, there was this world—tied in sacred knots, whispered in fir groves, and remembered still in the stones.

These were the gods who crowned kings.
And they are not yet done watching.

Thread of Ash and Fire

The gods who crowned kings
now sit in silence.
The bells still ring
but the thread grows thin.

Oh thread of red,
wound on wrist and word,
when you fray,
what shall bind us then?

Not oath, not coin,
not ink upon scroll–
but the silence of forests
remembering the names
we've forgotten to call.

O Shyamala,
keeper of thresholds,
let not the pact be lost
to iron and ink.

Let the dust still know
where sovereignty knelt.

2

The Threads of Trade

Long before the British carved their switchback roads into the mountain flanks, a quieter geometry pulsed through the hills: a skein of trails trodden not by boots but by hooves, barefoot porters, and patient caravans. These were not backwaters. They were breathing arteries—trading routes older than any border, older even than most kingdoms—binding the mid-Himalayas to the high plateau and the plains beyond.

Imagine a caravan, not bound for Simla's cantonments, but setting out from a Kinnauri hamlet in the blue light of dawn. Ponies bearing panniers of salt and wool, bells jingling in rhythm with their stride. Ladakhi traders bring pashmina, fine as mist, packed tight against the cold. From Yarkand comes pressed brick tea, pungent and potent,

coveted by the high monasteries. Traders carry turquoise and coral, and return with copper vessels, shawls, and pulses from Kangra's richer soils. These were not mere commodities—they were emissaries, crossing from one world to another.

The inner valleys—Lahaul, Spiti, Kinnaur—offered their own treasures. Medicinal herbs, gathered under moonlight by those who knew the chants. Wool sheared and spun on looms by women who also sang to the gods. Rock salt chipped from ancient seams. These goods moved in a long relay—village to village, shoulder to shoulder, guided more by memory than maps.

There were no central exchanges, no counting houses. Trade gathered instead in meadows and river junctions—seasonal fairs like Lavi, held near Rampur, where men from the plains bartered with highland herders. The air shimmered with dialects: Tibetan, Pahari, Kinnauri, a touch of Persian or Sanskrit or Dogri, depending on the year. Millet might be swapped for a copper pot. A salt brick for a sheep. A prayer flag for a handful of chilgoza pine nuts.

And always—woven through the bustle—there was trust. Not the notarised, stamped variety of distant courts, but a deeper kind. Word as bond. Lineage as guarantee. Dharma as ledger.

Among these traders were Jain families who brought not only goods but ethics. Merchants ldid not simply tally profits. They tallied karma. In a time when others were drawn to the easy margins of moneylending, or the new

frontier of timber felling, the Jain stood apart. To uproot a forest for sale, or bind a farmer in generational debt, violated his vow of ahimsa. His business was not just a livelihood. It was a practice of restraint. His ledgers bore more than numbers—they bore his conscience.

To such traders, the market was not a battlefield. It was a sacred meeting ground. Transactions were offerings. Wealth, if rightly earned, was a form of service. And in this service lay stability—communities knit together not by fiat, but by reciprocity.

Even temples participated. Many served as vaults, arbiters, and way-stations. The gods were not just patrons of harvest or monsoon. They oversaw trade. Oaths were sworn in their names. Disputes settled at their doorsteps. A goddess might be invoked to bless a caravan, or to curse one that broke its promise.

This was the moral economy of the mountains. Not static, but supple. Not primitive, but precise. It was held together by memory, story, and the deep intuition that profit without purpose was a kind of theft—from the land, from the future, from dharma itself.

But even as the fairs swelled and the trails deepened, a new kind of road was coming—one that did not curve with the contour of the earth but cut through it. One that answered not to deota or custom, but to surveyor's pole and Queen's writ. The books would soon be rewritten. The threads would fray.

...Millet might be swapped for a copper pot. A salt brick for a sheep. A prayer flag for a handful of chilgoza pine nuts.

And sometimes, something more.

Take the story of Tsering Dorje, a trader from Nako, whose family had for generations crossed the Shipki La to barter wool and salt with the traders from Tibet. One year, at the Lavi fair near Rampur, he arrived later than usual. Early snows had slowed the descent. By the time he set up his modest cloth canopy beside the river, most of the pashmina had already been traded. He had little to offer but salt, some dried apricots, and a single spool of hand-spun yak wool—soft, smoky grey, and coiled like a sleeping snake.

Across the fair, an old woman from Kangra, Amma Leela, was selling earthenware—jars and cups shaped by the rhythm of her palms. The two watched each other for half a day without speaking. At dusk, as the fair fires began to light, Tsering crossed to her stall. He picked up a cup, ran his finger along its rim, and said quietly, "Your hands know stillness."

She smiled. "And yours know patience."

He offered her the spool. She handed him two cups and a lidded jar in return. No bargaining. No excess.

They shared roasted maize by the riverbank that night, speaking little, watching the stars wheel slowly overhead. The next morning, they went their ways. But each returned

to Lavi the year after, and the year after that. Their trades became ritual. A quiet friendship, shaped not by words, but by clay and wool.

The Woman with the Copper Bangles

Every spring, when the snow retreated from the lower trails, Paro Devi would lift her bundles onto her back and begin the slow descent from her village near Mashobra to the seasonal fair at Sunni. She carried what her family had made through the long winter—handwoven shawls, fermented radish pickles, and her husband's finely turned wooden spoons.

But it was her own trade that she took most pride in: copper bangles, hammered into gentle spirals and etched with protective mantras. She crafted them at night, by oil-lamp, when the children were asleep and the winds howled through the deodar.

At the Sunni fair, she set up near the temple steps. Men came first, curious but wary. But the women—they came with soft greetings and firm haggles. A widow from Theog offered Paro a basket of dried apricots and a pair of goatskin slippers in exchange for five bangles. A young girl from Naldehra cried until her mother relented and traded a bundle of wool for one with a lotus etched on it.

Paro returned home lighter of burden but heavier with coin, barter, and story. One bangle remained, tucked into

her blouse. It was for her daughter—too young now, but soon, Paro thought, she too would learn what it meant to sell without shame and give without fear.

The Forest Sisterhood

Deep in the cedar thickets above Tattapani, three sisters—Jhuma, Sarki, and Meher—moved like shadows, each knowing where to find what the forest wished to share. They were gatherers, not takers. Their baskets were lined with soft moss to cradle the delicacies of the forest: morels hidden under last year's leaves, the first shoots of nettle, a resin that could calm fevers and dreams.

They moved by scent and silence, whispering to trees as if greeting old aunts. Some herbs they would boil into tinctures for barter. Others were delivered directly to the travelling Tibetan monk who passed each solstice, exchanging them for salt and dry tea.

The forest gave freely to those who asked rightly. And so, they left offerings: a shard of jaggery here, a song hummed at the foot of a grandmother tree, a ribbon of hair tied to a wind-bent branch.

At the village market, they said little. The herbs spoke for themselves.

One spring, when Sarki fell ill, Meher returned alone. She carried her sister's basket too. "The plants will know," she said. "And give us what she needs."

And they did.

The Scent of Clove and Camphor

In the riverside town of Rampur, where Hindu pilgrims met Buddhist monks and Muslim traders in a swirl of languages and spices, there stood a stall draped in turmeric-coloured cloth. Behind it worked Abdul Rahim, a spice merchant from Saharanpur, and his long-time friend and partner, Govindlal Sharma, a Brahmin from Karsog.

Their fathers had once traded together. Now, so did they. Rahim sourced cloves, cardamom, and cassia bark from the plains. Govindlal offered him access to highland goods—rhododendron honey, Himalayan turmeric, wild saffron.

On Fridays, Rahim closed the stall early for Jumu'ah. On Ekadashi, Govindlal fasted. They never argued about it. They shared earnings, meals, and an old iron scale passed down from Rahim's grandfather.

One winter, a tax collector questioned the legality of their partnership. "You can't jointly hold a license," he said. "The books are under different names."

Govindlal smiled, slicing dried ginger with a curved blade. "The ledger may have names," he said, "but the trade has only trust."

Rahim handed the man a pouch of camphor. “For your headache,” he said. “Too much thinking about borders makes the mind stiff.”

They laughed. The tax collector left, empty-handed but strangely satisfied.

And the partnership endured—quiet, fragrant, and indivisible.

The Child Apprentice and the Mapmaker

Beneath the Theodolite

He was no older than twelve, with ink-stained fingers and a crow feather tucked behind his ear. He had been sent by his uncle, the village munshi, to assist the British surveyor. The man—Mr. Alexander Gerard—spoke in clipped syllables and called him “boy,” but soon came to rely on him. The child knew the ridge-lines better than any map ever could.

They would sit for hours under the sun, he holding the tripod steady as the theodolite blinked at the mountains. He taught the sahib the names of peaks the British had never heard: Shali, Hatu, Deo Tibba. He did not understand the imperial hunger for measurement, but he admired the way the surveyor squinted into the eyepiece, as if searching for something fragile.

One day, he asked, “Why do you draw these lines, sahib?”

Gerard did not answer at first. Then, gently: “To bring order to the world.”

The boy thought of the sacred grove above the village, where no tree had ever been felled and no line dared drawn.

He held his tongue.

The Nomadic Herder and the Ridge That Disappeared

The Boundary Shift

Norbu of the Bagha clan had walked these paths since he could remember. Each summer, he led his yak caravan from the Sutlej valley to the meadows near Mahasu. His grandfather had taught him which grasses cured belly rot, which springs never froze, which trees whispered of storms before they came.

But in 1829, a stranger in uniform stopped him. “This land,” the man said, “is now under the jurisdiction of the East India Company.”

Norbu didn’t understand. “The land moves?” he asked.

The soldier showed him a paper filled with lines and stamps. “This ridge,” he pointed, “is the new border.”

But to Norbu, the land had never belonged to anyone. The clouds grazed just as his yaks did. The ridge was not a wall—it was a song, sung with each step of the herd.

That year, Norbu's caravan took a longer path. He avoided the new checkpoint, circled higher, and left no trace but hoofprints and smoke.

He did not return the next season.

The Women Traders and the Disappearing Market

Beneath the Deodars

Each Tuesday, the women of Basantpur came winding down the forest path with their baskets. Dried apricots, woolen shawls, pine resin, and dried nettle—harvested from the upper glades. At the makeshift bazaar near Bharari, they exchanged these for salt, jaggery, lamp oil, and once, even a bolt of muslin from Bengal.

They traded with Pahari Brahmins, with Muslim butchers from Solan, with itinerant Jain moneylenders from the plains. No one asked whose land they stood on. The forest was old, the market older still.

But in 1832, a white fence appeared. Around it were posted signs in a language they could not read. The Kennedy House had grown, and a new "sanitary perimeter" had been declared. The bazaar was now "a health risk," the Political Agent said.

The women waited outside the fence that week, baskets in hand. None dared cross.

After a long silence, they turned back. The sound of barter—the old music of mountain life—died a little that day.

The city did not begin as a plan. It began as a feeling.

A breath of air—cool, dry, tinged with pine and distant snow—whispered through the tall grass on a ridge above the Sutlej. For a certain kind of Englishman, freshly peeled from the furnace of the Indian plains, this was not just refreshing—it was redemptive. The sun was clean here, not smothering. The wind did not punish, it caressed. There were no flies, no monsoon rot, no fevered nights. Only clarity. Elevation. A vague but insistent resemblance to something half-remembered—England, perhaps—but better. Sharper. Quieter. Freer.

In 1817, two such men, Alexander and Patrick Gerard, arrived with instructions to measure land, not to feel it. They were surveyors with the 27th Native Infantry, tasked with converting the wildness of the Himalaya into a geometry fit for empire. But when they pitched their tent on the slopes of Jakkho Hill, some deeper register was stirred. The landscape, unbidden, breached the bureaucratic. In their reports, the brothers slipped from cartography into reverie: clouds pooling in the valleys like milk, ridge-lines softened by mist, air that could cleanse the lungs and the soul. The weather, they wrote, was Alpine. Therapeutic. Perfect.

Their reports traveled down to the plains, and with them, a quiet thrill.

A year later, Lieutenant Charles Pratt Kennedy, the Political Agent at Sabathu, made the long ascent himself. He found a clearing, built a hut of wood and grass, and declared a kind of arrival. It was no more than a glorified shed, but it was shelter—and it was the beginning. He had asked the Rana of Keonthal for permission, a gesture more than a negotiation. The Rana, already bent low by British artillery and precedent, stipulated only that no large trees be felled and no sacred animals slaughtered. These were not terms so much as the last murmurs of a sovereignty slipping away.

In time, Kennedy built something more permanent: a two-storey timber house with a broad verandah and commanding views—a convalescent's refuge for officers broken by heat and war. He named it, without hesitation, "The Kennedy House." As though the naming itself conferred ownership. As though the act of dwelling made it theirs.

Thus the conquest began—not with gunfire, but with a dwelling. Not with force, but with the slow, steady weight of presence.

The land, crescent-shaped and sacred to two river systems, still technically belonged to the Maharaja of Patiala and the Rana of Keonthal. But only technically. The true balance of power had shifted years earlier, in 1816, when General David Ochterlony—armed with modern artillery—had shelled the formidable Gorkha fortress at

Maloun into silence. That thunder was still echoing in every British request that followed. A refusal was never really on offer.

The Gorkhas had provided the perfect alibi. They had swept across the Sutlej and Yamuna with imperial ambitions of their own, annexing fragile hill states as they came. Local rulers, unable to resist, turned to the British. The British obliged—not out of altruism, but opportunity. The Anglo-Nepalese war was punishing and, at first, humbling. But when the British finally prevailed, they recast themselves as liberators. They issued new "sanads" to the native princes, reinstating them in name while quietly stripping them of authority. Political Agents would now oversee all matters of consequence. The hill rajas were allowed to reign, but never to rule.

And in return for this staged sovereignty, they would pay the British the same tribute the Gorkhas once demanded: thirty percent of all revenue. Nothing had changed but the accent of the collector.

Once secured by paper and precedent, the land began to morph. In 1827, Lord Amherst visited the ridge, stepping lightly but looking long. He was entranced. His presence triggered the formal negotiations that would soon transfer full control of Shimla to the British. By 1831, the deal was complete. The following summer, Lord William Bentinck came not as a guest, but as a resident. The die was cast. Shimla was no longer an experiment. It was policy.

With the Governor-General came his retinue. Civil servants, officers, wives, children, servants, cooks. By the

early 1840s, the hills were dotted with over a hundred cottages—clapboard structures with tin roofs and wide porches, all facing the valley, as if to survey the land they now claimed as their retreat.

But the vision was more delicate than it seemed.

Every pane of glass, every sack of flour, every bottle of whisky, every iron nail had to be hauled by mule, porter, or bullock over unforgiving terrain. The nearest depot was forty miles away. Roads were more suggestion than reality. Rain turned paths into torrents, and slips could mean death. Shimla was a logistical absurdity. But they pressed on—driven by the sheer will to live differently.

This was the paradox of British rule in India, distilled into a single city: an empire that spoke endlessly of civilisation and self-sufficiency, yet depended utterly on the people it ruled. The British could not build Shimla without native hands. They could not eat, sleep, or survive without local intermediaries—contractors, coolies, traders—men who knew the mountains, who spoke the tongues, who took the risks for a sliver of reward.

Shimla was no accident. It was a project. A fantasy, meticulously supplied. A conquest, not by cannon, but by claim and by comfort.

3

The Theodolite & The Gun.

A Mapmaker's Reverie

Entry by Lieutenant Alexander Gerard — June 3, 1817

"We set camp on the western slope of Jakkho at dawn, and never in my life have I breathed air so clear. The wind carries the scent of rhododendron and cedar in equal measure—and in that moment, surveying felt more like worship. I measured ridge after ridge, but the instruments could not capture what I felt in my chest. The valleys lie soft beneath a veil of mist; clouds pool like warm milk in their bowels. It is as though God's hand itself carved each slope.

I speak of this with shame to the regiment, for they ask only for measurements, not for poetry. And yet—even while I work—I feel I am mapping prayer, not territory."

The Political Agent's Claim

Entry by Lieutenant Charles Pratt Kennedy — April 14, 1818

“My hut stands now on firm ground, though still simple as a shepherd’s shack. The Rana of Keonthal attended but offered no objection when I asked permission to build. His stipulations were few—no trees felled, no oxen slaughtered. I count his compliance as accord, albeit purchased with subtle pressure.

My ceremonial structure rises on that claim: timber walls, a verandah facing the valley, and the first stair built by British hands atop an Indian ridge. It strikes me that in naming it ‘Kennedy House’, I have done more than build a shelter—I have placed a flag in the air: this land, this air, may be ours to frame.”

The Civil Servant’s Realisation

Entry by Captain Geoffrey Birch — September 2, 1819

“The hill folk are uncivilised, we are told—‘treacherous’, ‘sanguinary’. Yet in the lower bazaar, I watched women trading shawls, salt, and chilgoza as though performing sacred ritual, not commerce. They offered no receipt—but mutual trust, born from years of exchange.

We erect our offices and gilt invitations to balls and further up the ridge erect civil lines. But it will not do, to dismiss entirely native justice as barbarous. I saw today a man whose hand had been cut off by clan rule for theft—a punishment terrible to see, but no less cruel, in its disregard for due process, than our whipping post.

We justify our intervention as moral uplift. Yet many here cling to an older order—one that functions through communal memory and oath. If we uproot that, we risk uprooting the people themselves."

Landscape Meditation: The Silence Between Roads

There are days when the mountains do not speak in words,
but in textures.
In the hush before sunrise, when the mist curls like breath
around the deodars,
they whisper in scent and shadow.
Pine-sap and loam.
A distant bell from a mule's neck.
The rustle of feet, long gone, imprinted in stone paths that
have forgotten their names.

Before maps, before flags, before proclamations,
this land knew its shape through stories told around
firelight
and distances measured not in miles, but in fatigue,
in the weight of salt carried across ridges,
in the tightness of a shawl wound tighter as wind bit higher.

The mountain is not a passive witness.
It remembers the rhythm of barter, the hush of caravan
rest,
the echo of hymns in Tibetan dialects,

and the warmth of nettle soup shared under a
rhododendron canopy.

When the British came, they did not ask the mountain how
it wished to be seen.
They drew lines.
They set coordinates.
They flattened what was once felt.

But the mountain is patient.
It grows back over memory.
It covers the scars with moss.
It shelters the old gods beneath crumbling shrines.
It does not forget the silence between roads.

Meditation: They Built on the Ridges

They built their towns on the mountain tops.

Simla. Jutogh. Dagshai.

Their compasses pointed not to rivers or soil,
but to the breeze—cool, bracing, and far from the fevered
plains.
They sought air, not earth.
View, not root.
A conquest of altitude, not belonging.

Before them, the towns lived in the valleys.

Where the water flowed.
Where the apricot orchards fed entire families.
Where springs were tended like kin.
Where smoke curled low from hearths, not chimneys.

To live on the ridge was once unthinkable.
A place for shepherds, for the sacred, for transit.
No one built where the snow must be borne, where the soil is thin,
where trees grow slow and water knows only to fall.

But the new rulers wanted distance—from heat, from rot,
from the eyes of those they ruled.
So they carved bungalows into the spines of gods,
and laid roads like scars along the ridgelines.
They rerouted springs, dynamited slopes,
turned sacred groves into golf courses.

Each summer they climbed higher,
and the rivers ran slower.

The children of the hills learned to carry water uphill,
learned the word for "reservoir,"
learned what it meant to pay for what once was gifted.

In time, the valleys dried.
The forest forgot its own density.
The leeches and orchids retreated.
The snow no longer fell as it once did.

But the mountains remember.
Not in anger.
In sediment.

In landslides.
In the strange stillness that comes before the ridge gives way.

A Meditation in the Voice of Water

We fell.

That was our vow–
to fall, always.
From snowmelt to stream,
from fissure to root,
from cloud to cradle
and down again.

We traced the secret paths.
Through moss and quartz,
between cedar feet and fern fingers,
we braided the slopes with tenderness.
We nourished the valleys–not out of duty,
but out of joy.

We fell into the mouths of deer,
into the hollows of cupped hands,
into the terraced songs of women who sang to us
as they carried us home in brass vessels,
their arms smelling of woodsmoke and river.

We fell until they made us stop.

They bored pipes into the bones of the hills.
They blasted our veins into roads.
They stacked stone upon spring
and called it progress.
They forced us uphill in steel skins,
bound us in tanks,
chlorinated our memories.

They forgot: we are not meant to wait.

We are not stillness.
We are the act of becoming.

Once, we arrived in silence and left with praise.
Now, we are rationed.
Metered.
Blamed.

We do not resent. We remember.

We remember the goddess in the seep.
The salamander's breath.
The child who wept when his stream turned grey.

We remember the weight of dynamite.
The wound of concrete.
The forest that no longer drinks.

But we are patient.
Even in captivity, we whisper.
Even in exile, we plan.

One day, we will return the way we came—
not in violence,
but in the quiet,
unquestionable
rightness
of a rain that knows where to fall.

4

The Ledger’s Shadow

They came not with rifles, but with registers.
Not with battalions, but with balance sheets.
Not to rule by force, but by fraction.

When the British entered the hills, they brought their own ways of seeing: a compulsion to measure, to map, to assign value in pounds, annas, and acres. But the land did not speak in such terms—not yet. And so they needed interpreters. Not of language, but of logic. They needed those who could translate the slipperiness of barter into the stark, disciplined lines of a ledger.

Thus emerged a new caste of power—the Ledgermen.

They were not kings, yet their dominion ran deeper than crowns. Their sovereignty lay not in the visible trappings of authority, but in the quiet compulsion of debt. They came from old trading communities, shaped by centuries of adaptive intelligence. Among them were the Soods of the lower hills—nimble, discreet, attuned to the shifting moods of both sahibs and swamis. Others had roots in the dry heart of Rajasthan—Jains, Oswals, Aggarwals—those whom the world had long learned not to underestimate.

They had not come to conquer.
They had come to be needed.

The British saw in them convenience. The hills, with their dense forests and resistant languages, could not be managed by decree alone. Someone had to oil the machinery of empire, keep the tea flowing and the labour moving, build cantonments and balance books. That someone, more often than not, carried a ledger.

And the ledger never forgot.

The Merchants of Simla

Four brothers. That is how the story begins.

The Merchants arrived in Simla not with fanfare, but with foresight. The British had chosen the ridge-lines for their escape from the plains—an inversion of centuries of Himalayan settlement, which had always honoured the valleys where water pooled and crops could grow. But the sahibs wanted height. Cool air. Distance.

That meant roads where there were none, homes where only deodar stood, servants to carry bathwater and brandy up slopes too steep for sense.

The Merchants offered all this. They knew how to hire, how to supply, how to stay three steps ahead of both need and payment. They set up contracts for timber, opened grain depots along marching routes, and slowly became indispensable to the expanding summer capital. Their name began appearing not just on shop signs but on account slips issued from British barracks. As contractors, they were diligent. As moneylenders, meticulous. As hosts to travelling sahibs, impeccably deferential.

But always, they were watching. Learning.

In time, their books grew thicker than the district gazetteer. They began to issue credit not just to coolies and cobblers, but to colonial officers awaiting delayed pensions. Their networks reached from Simla's Mall Road to the timber depots of Chopal, from the cantonments of Dagshai

to the bustling grain mandis of Ludhiana. Every transaction left behind not just a receipt, but an obligation.

They didn't demand fealty.
They simply arranged that you always owed them—just enough.

The Ledgerman's Dharma

The Ledgerman didn't raise his voice. He adjusted margins. He didn't seize land; he repossessed futures. His gods lived in safes, and his mantras were interest tables.

He followed a quiet creed—ancient, flexible, precise:

- Saam (साम): Speak sweetly. Make it sound like a favour. Smile when you offer the terms.
- Daam (दाम): Everyone has a price. Discover it gently.
- Dand (दंड): Delay repayment? Watch the supply chain evaporate.
- Bhed (भेद): Know your debtor's weakness. Don't exploit it—just hold it like a necklace, visible.

The village wise men feared the moneylender more than the magistrate. The magistrate might punish. The Ledgerman could wait.

He could wait three generations.

Proverbs from the Bazaar

They did not speak of morals. They spoke in margins.

- “Jo dikhe, so bikhe.” What is seen, is sold. Make the façade gleam, even if the accounts rot beneath.
- “Kaudi ka karz, kaudi se chukaana.” Even the debt of a shell must be repaid. Principle matters, even when the amount seems laughable.
- “Bina vyapar, sab soon.” Without trade, all is empty. Commerce is not sin. It is dharma. It is survival. It is god.

The Merchant Who Refused

But there were others. Traders who chose a different compass.

In a quiet courtyard of Sabzi Mandi, you might still hear the name Jain spoken with a hush of respect. A Jain by faith and a merchant by birth, Jain came from the same desert soils as those who built empires on opium and jute. But he believed the ledger had limits. He believed that profit without principle was violence in disguise.

To cut down a deodar that had stood for 300 years—just to please a British officer’s bungalow blueprint—was, to Jain, a kind of heresy. A betrayal of the harmony that the Jain cosmos demanded. He refused timber contracts. Refused to fund ventures tied to logging, forced labour, or

indenture. Even when it meant losing clients. Even when sahibs scoffed.

Instead, he turned to fair trade. Grain, textiles, small loans to women's collectives. He built schools, yes—but not with the residue of ruin. His ledger was thinner, but lighter. It did not stain.

And so while the Legdermans' name may have glittered in British records, Jain's name became a whisper in temple courtyards, a story told to children: You can count coins without counting curses.

In the Shadow

The Ledgermen were not villains. They did not see themselves as such. They clothed beggars in winter, they fed the priest during festivals. They funded the bazaar and repaired the road. But always, it came back to balance. The balance of accounts. The asymmetry of dependence.

They became the financial nervous system of empire in the hills—more efficient than proclamations, more enduring than regiments.

They understood something the British never fully grasped: that a man in debt is more obedient than a man in chains.

And thus, in the ledger's shadow, new hierarchies were drawn. Not by sword. Not by scripture. But by signature.

The Ledger’s Shadow

Let us descend now from the timbered verandahs of Simla to a stone-walled hamlet clinging to a ridge below Jutogh, where a different kind of story unfolded—quieter, slower, but no less binding.

The Debt of Tulsi Devi

Tulsi Devi’s husband, Ramesh, was a carpenter with hands like roots and a gait forever uphill. When the British arrived, they needed beds, chairs, floors, walls—wood made into function. Ramesh found work easily in Simla, his name passed from one sahibs’ quarter to the next. But the rains that year were harsh, and on a slope above Summer Hill, a scaffold gave way.

Tulsi took a small loan from the Ledgerman brothers to pay for his cremation and the last rites. It was only thirty rupees—an amount wrapped in ceremony, not commerce. But the contract was notarised, the interest real. Thirty turned to sixty by winter. By the second spring, it was one hundred twenty. Her goat was sold. Her silver anklets, gone. And still the ledger breathed, marking each month with lines like a spiderweb: beautiful, exact, inescapable.

Her son, Bhola, barely ten, began work as a runner—first for the Ledgermans’ timber office, then for their liquor godown. Tulsi kept her head bowed, but her body began to bend, one vertebra at a time, under a debt that was no longer money—it was gravity.

There was no malice in it. Only method.

From the Memoranda of Captain E.H. Weatherby, Assistant Collector of Simla District, 1862

"It is most curious to observe the efficiency with which the native baniyas have insinuated themselves into every logistical dimension of this hill station's operation. The Ledgermen, in particular, appear to have achieved near-monopoly in transport contracts, with additional footholds in grain supply, liquor rationing, and construction timber. Their accounts are meticulous. Indeed, their ledgers are in better order than those kept by the Company itself.

While their practices are of concern—particularly the extraction of compound interest from illiterate locals—it cannot be denied that without their cooperation, the provisioning of the station would grind to a halt. I daresay, if the Empire runs on steam and steel in the plains, it runs on Ledgerman ink in the hills."

Folktale: The Silver Coin and the Stone

Once, they say, a moneylender gave a herder's daughter a silver coin to buy salt. The girl placed it under a flat stone near the river and went to bathe. A bird, seeing the glint, stole it.

When she returned, the coin was gone.

Years later, the moneylender arrived with a ledger, now thick with years. "Your coin," he said, "has grown into a field of debt." The girl, now a woman, protested: "But the coin was taken by a bird!"

The moneylender smiled. "My dear, that is your misfortune. The ledger is mine."

That winter, the woman's goats were claimed, her house made collateral. And even now, near that same river, some say a flat stone still weeps when it rains.

Epilogue: Shadows and Balances

The rise of the Ledgermen was not just an economic transformation—it was an epistemic one. They replaced kinship with credit, generosity with ledger, memory with receipting. But not all were blind to the consequences.

In a letter never sent, a trader once wrote:

"A true balance does not tip by weight alone. It is moved by intention."

By the close of the 19th century, many of the great fortunes of Simla had been established—not with conquest, but with quiet digits, stroked in red and black. Some ledgers built schools, others prisons. The ink was the same.

And in the forests now denuded, in the hamlets shadowed by obligation, in the brittle silence of ancestral springs long dry, the land remembered every transaction the paper forgot.

The Ledger's Shadow

The Cartographer's Inheritance

It was not only ledgers that reshaped the hills, but the cold geometry of classification. When the British could not fully comprehend the chaotic fluidity of hill economies—barter, ritual offerings, seasonal flows of goods and herders—they did the only thing the Empire knew how to do with the unknown.

They surveyed it.
They mapped it.
They named it.
Then they taxed it.

Extract from Revenue Reassessment Report, Punjab Hill States Division, 1874

“District: Simla and Environs – Reclassification for Fiscal Rationalisation”

In consultation with the Board of Revenue and the Survey Department, the following economic designations are to be applied to hill settlements to better facilitate revenue extraction, labour mobilisation, and infrastructural prioritisation. These classifications shall replace former indigenous categories of “mela town,” “gaddi halt,” “monastic node,” or “sacred barter village.”

1. Commercial Town (C1):
   Simla, Dagshai, Subathu
   – Defined by British cantonment presence and settler population.
   – Eligible for full-scale municipal funding and police posts.
   – Subject to excise revenue, building tax, and market duty.

2. Timber Extraction Node (T2):
   Chopal, Kotgarh
   – Designated for focused cedar and pine felling under Company-licensed contractors.
   – Revenue derived from forest lease premiums and

porter labour rosters.
– Traditional forest rights to be reviewed and, where necessary, annulled.

3. Transit Bazaar (B3):
Mashobra, Narkanda
– Former ritual and barter nodes now reclassified as taxable periodic markets.
– Subject to toll tax, goods duty, and seasonal fair licensing.
– Gaddi herders to be issued tokens and passes for regulated movement.

4. Subsistence Hamlet (S4):
Jakhoo, Junga, Shoghi
– Minimal revenue importance; suitable for labour conscription and grain procurement.
– Households to be enumerated in detail; bonded debt records to be cross-referenced with Baniya registers.

The Cartographic Shift

This new taxonomy did more than organise. It reoriented. A village that had once been known for the sweetness of its apricot blossoms or the pilgrim stories told around its spring now became a “resource cluster.” A ridge once defined by the grazing patterns of sheep became a “labour catchment basin.” Livelihoods were re-languaged into economic units.

Even language itself began to shift.

Old names—Pujar-ka-khet (Priest's Field), Bakri-dhar (Goat Ridge), Mela-gaon (Festival Village)—began to disappear from official records. In their place arose strange, cold names: Forest Compartment 12A, Excise Range Sector 3, Transit Point Simla-Jutogh.

It was not conquest by gun. It was conquest by code.

A Quiet Rebellion of Ink

But not all complied. In the dusty corners of family homes, some elders continued to draw the old maps—not for taxation, but for memory. Women stitched the shape of their valley into quilts. Temple priests tucked leaf-scrolls into rafters with names no sahib would recognise.

And in the village of Ghanahatti, a boy named Bhola, once bound by debt, would one day learn to draw both maps. The one the Company demanded—and the one the mountain still whispered when the fog was thick and the stars aligned just right.

From Grove to Grid – The Rewriting of Shyamala

Before it was a cantonment, before it became the seat of the Viceroy's summer court, before the railway serpentined into its chest—this place was a grove.

Not a town.
Not even a village.
A grove.

Dense with oaks, wild roses, and silence thick enough to hold a prayer in place for days. The locals knew it as Shyamala—a form of the goddess Kali, black-hued and fiercely loving. Her shrine was simple, a cluster of stones blackened by ghee and time, surrounded by bichhu buti and the sharp green of stinging nettle. No temple spire pierced the sky. Only the wind did.

When people passed through, they left behind tokens—a silver anklet, a smear of haldi, an unfinished song. The forest kept them all, gently.

And then the Empire arrived.

Excerpt from the Journal of Lt. Peter G. Fairfax, East India Company Surveyor, 1815

“Arrived at an unnamed ridge west of Subathu, elevation most suitable for a convalescent station. Thickly wooded. Encountered curious local rite: women circling a crude stone idol with red threads and ashes. Said to be ‘Shyāmala Devi’—a form of their feminine deity.

Proposed anglicisation: Simla, for ease of pronunciation and postal accuracy."

The Sacred and the Scalable

What the goddess embodied was slowly displaced—not destroyed outright, but transformed. From Shyamala, she became Simla. Not a living deity but a geographic index. A post office pin. A District Collector's desk. Her blackness—once sacred, maternal, fierce—was bleached into the pale clarity of British maps. Her name, once chanted in hushed offerings, now echoed in typewritten memos.

The shrine was not razed, but it was ignored. Left to moss. Overgrown. Its sanctity diluted by proximity to whiskey crates and soldiers' barracks.

Later, an Anglican church would rise where the forest once sang. And in front of it, a new form of ritual began: the weekly promenade of officers and their wives, parasols open, gossip floating like dust.

No one remembered the shape of her eyes.
But the place still remembered her.

Local Oral Fragment, Circa 1890s – Passed from Grandmother to Daughter

They changed her name, but she did not leave.
She became the mist.
She sat behind the oak tree no one could fell.
She whispered to the leopard who never took a goat.
And once a year, when no sahibs watched, we returned.
We left her almonds, not coin.
We asked for nothing.
And still, she answered.

A Place Bent into a Function

In reclassifying Simla, the Empire enacted more than logistics. It attempted a metaphysical remapping—converting spirit into service, sanctity into real estate. What was once a sacred grove was now the beating paper-heart of summer governance. From this hill, decisions were made about taxes, armies, treaties, and punishments that stretched across the subcontinent.

The goddess watched.
Not defeated—just further in.

Mythic Interlude: The Return of the Grove

They say it happened in the monsoon of 1923, though some say it was earlier, and others later still. But all agree it began with a dream.

It came not to a priest, nor a sadhu, nor a Brahmin of high caste. It came to Nirmala, a young girl who swept the floors of the newly built Viceregal Lodge. Her family had come from Bilaspur for work. Her hands were raw from lye. She did not know the old name of the hill.

But the hill knew her.

The dream was thick with trees—trees she had never seen but somehow recognised. Oak, cedar, horse chestnut. There was no speech in the dream, only presence. And a black-skinned woman walking barefoot through the forest, leaving no footprints but dripping gold from her fingertips. Wherever the drops fell, orchids bloomed in an instant.

Nirmala followed, silent. The woman turned at the grove's edge. Her eyes were like two deep wells at night—one filled with fury, the other with love.

When Nirmala woke, her pillow was damp with mist.

The next day, the mist did not lift.

It blanketed Simla for nine days. The mail carts halted. Horses refused to move past a certain bend. Entire files were lost in the moisture—years of colonial tax records blurred into pulp. Telegraph wires hummed strange frequencies. One officer claimed the trees had moved, grown closer to the Lodge, whispering. He was sent back to Calcutta for rest.

On the ninth day, the mist gathered around the old, forgotten shrine behind the Mall. A flash flood tore through a government shed built on its foundations. When the rubble settled, the stones of Shyamala Devi stood exposed—clean, as if washed by invisible hands. A smear of fresh vermillion glistened on one.

No one confessed to placing it.

Folktale Variant Told by Old Tea-Seller near Lakkar Bazaar

"She was patient, our goddess. She waited till they lost the name in their mouths. Then she poured it back into the soil. Simla, they called it. But the forest still called her Shyamala.

When the books got wet, when the trees leaned in, when even the mountain goats would not cross the line—they knew.

They don't write that in the memos.

But we know."

And Nirmala?

She left the Lodge that very week and took a job sweeping the stairs at Kali Bari. Some say she still dreams of trees blooming in reverse, their roots reaching upward toward the stars.

Some say the goddess chose her to keep the name alive—not in proclamation, but in presence.

A whisper.

A girl's feet on the cold floor of dawn.

A shrine that no longer hides.

5

The White City

Simla was not built; it was summoned. Conjured like an apparition, it rose from the ridge-line not as a natural extension of the land, but as a dream transposed—a spectral vision of England, imposed upon the spine of the Himalayas. Wreathed in mist, it was imagined as a sanctuary: temperate, orderly, aloof. A retreat from the unruly, humid vastness of the Indian plains below. Here, atop the ridge, empire sought to reassert itself—not with gunpowder or decree, but with rose gardens, tea services, and red-roofed cottages set just so.

It was a fiction made stone. A grand illusion constructed plank by plank, beam by beam, ritual by ritual. Simla became the performance of civility in an uncivilised world—

as the British saw it. Architecture became ideology. The baronial splendour of the Viceregal Lodge did not merely house authority; it embodied it. The tidy cottages with their chimney pots, the clipped hedges and the curling driveways, the Mall road with its promenade of parasols—all this was less infrastructure than stagecraft. An elaborate tableau designed to soothe the homesick conscience of the coloniser and to convince the governed that order and cleanliness were moral facts.

But behind this façade of civility stood the deeper paradox of the empire: the cleaner it looked abroad, the filthier it festered at home.

Across the Sea: The Myth of Cleanliness

To understand Simla's sanitised grandeur, one must remember London as it was in the mid-nineteenth century —not the manicured squares or marble banks, but the bowels of the imperial capital: Shoreditch, Whitechapel, Bermondsey. In those dark tenements, whole families huddled in coffin-sized beds rented by the hour. The Thames stank like a wound. Cholera was not rare but seasonal. Soot slicked every surface. Soap was a luxury, not a habit. Here was the true motherland of empire—not a realm of refinement but of desperation, hunger, and soot-caked lungs.

It was from these grim streets that many of Simla's rulers had risen—not from noble blood, but from bootstraps and borrowed titles, their peerages freshly purchased with colonial plunder. The cleanliness they prized abroad was born of dirt at home. And the wealth that built Simla did not emerge from trade alone but from extraction, plain and brutal.

The Cost of Illusion

Simla was not a town that grew; it was a colonial graft. A foreign organism fused onto native terrain, indifferent to the body it fed upon. And the cost of its upkeep—its shimmering lawns and quiet order—was borne by ecosystems and communities far beyond its ridge.

The forests fell first.

To build the villas, clubs, churches, and cantonments, the colonial administration sanctioned the logging of ancient Himalayan deodars. By the 1880s, over 250,000 cubic feet of timber were harvested each year. Entire groves, once sacred to local deities, were reduced to lumber. What took centuries to grow vanished in a few summers—fed into sawmills to meet the standards of colonial aesthetics.

Then came the water. Mountain springs, once shared equitably by villages through informal commons and ritual practice, were appropriated to meet the needs of Simla's ruling class. The cool, clean water that once fed cattle and

filled village pots now flowed into cisterns at Annandale and tanked baths in Auckland House. The communities downstream, who had stewarded these sources for generations, found their fields dry, their gods thirsty.

And all of it—this conjured civility, this imported elegance—was lifted, quite literally, on the backs of others.

Begar, or forced labor, became systemic. Local peasants were pressed into service during key agricultural seasons. They carried bricks, timber, and the household furnishings of colonial officers up the narrow trails. Others bore the weight of the sahibs and memsahibs themselves—palanquin bearers, coolies, rickshaw pullers. They were made to carry not just mass, but the myth of supremacy, uphill, again and again, with no end in sight.

A Ghostly England

Simla was not a hybrid, nor a meeting ground. It was a third space—neither truly Indian, nor truly English, but a liminal outpost of imperial fantasy. Its rhythms, rituals, and seasons were tethered to London, not Ludhiana. When Parliament rose, so did the Viceregal household. When the monsoon came, the British fled to their altitudes. The hills became, for half the year, the beating heart of the colonial state—and yet entirely out of sync with the world it governed.

The city's cleanliness was achieved not by sanitation alone, but by segregation: spatial, cultural, moral. Indians

were cast as unclean by default. Their proximity to sacredness, to the land, to death, was read as defilement. Meanwhile, British impurity—housed in slums, debt, or disease—was simply out of view. The White City did not just elevate its inhabitants physically above the native population; it suspended them in a fiction of moral altitude.

Simla gleamed. But it gleamed like a blade.
And beneath that shine lay a deep, historical wound:
ecological, cultural, and spiritual.

To this day, the springs remember. The deodar groves remember.

And somewhere in the mist, the mountain goddess watches still.

The Weight of Empire

Simla, Summer of 1878

They told him the British liked to float. That was the word the priest used—float, not walk. "They do not let their feet touch the dust," he said with a chuckle, "as if the ground might stain them."

Ramu, aged seventeen, had never seen anyone float. But he had seen the palanquin his uncle used to carry—lacquered wood, silver trimmings, silk curtains. And he had seen his uncle's back, bowed permanently by the weight of that same wood, scarred with an old injury that never quite healed. The Sahib inside had been heavy—"fat with flour

and pride," his uncle used to say—but the burden, of course, was never just physical.

That summer, Ramu was conscripted for begar. His family needed their tiny patch of land. Refusal wasn't an option—not with the forest guards, the tehsildar, and the contractor in tight rotation like the gears of a grinding mill. He was sent to the Upper Bazaar, assigned to haul bricks and sand up the slope to where the new Anglo-Gothic library was rising. The foreman was from Peshawar. The architect wore a monocle and said "Hurry up, boys," as if they were flies he was swatting away.

The work was backbreaking. The incline steepened with each load. The soles of Ramu's feet blistered inside the threadbare juttis his mother had stitched from an old sack. The rope that strapped the tokri of stones to his forehead cut into the same spot day after day. They were told not to speak, not to rest too long, not to stare too long at the women who came out onto the balconies above.

But what stayed with him—long after the blisters healed and the monsoon came to wash the red dust from his skin—was the day he stumbled while crossing the Viceregal lawn. His load tumbled forward, bricks scattering across the green like misplaced offerings. A British officer, perched on a cane chair beneath a parasol, looked up and said nothing. But a shadow passed over his face, faint and cold.

Later, Ramu learned that the officer had sent a letter—complaining of "natives" marring the afternoon serenity.

That evening, Ramu sat on a rock just above the chorten at Sanjauli, where the sky sometimes pooled orange like spilled ghee. He touched the sore spot on his forehead. Then he looked down at the glowing city below—Simla, they called it now, though his grandmother still whispered Shyamala Devi when the rains came. The roofs glittered like beetle shells in the dying light.

"They float," he whispered, finally understanding.

Not because they are weightless, but because the weight has been passed down—into his bones, his back, his silence.

The Grandmother's Invocation

Whispered near the old spring beneath Jakhu Hill

"O Shyamala, Mother of Mists,
Keeper of groves, dark-skinned and deep-eyed,
Whose anklets were once the monsoon's thunder,
And whose breath cooled the forest roots—

Look how they have shaved your scalp of cedars,
Paved your thighs with foreign stone.
Their boots trample your sacred glades,
And their thirst drains the veins of our village springs.

We have forgotten your name on government papers,
But I still place marigold by your old shrine,

Still burn ghee on the solstice moon,
Still whisper your name when the dust rises from cracked soil.

Protect this boy, O Devi—he carries stone for those who would unmake you.
Stitch the cracks in his body with your rain.
Guard the names they would erase.
And when your time returns,
Let your voice rise in thunder through their parlours.
Let their polished floors remember the quake."

Letter from Major Edward Langford to His Wife, Edith

Dated August 1, 1878 – Simla Cantonment

My Dearest Edith,

I write to you from our temporary quarters in Simla, which, despite its remoteness, offers surprising comforts. The climate here is exquisite—cool and bracing, unlike the infernal plains. You would adore the roses on the Mall, and the scent of pine in the mornings is quite unlike anything in Surrey.

The Governor-General has taken to calling it "the Rome of the Raj," and indeed it feels something like that—a marble city above the dust. It's strange to think this was once nothing but forest and huts. The natives still call the place

Shyamala, though no one can pronounce it properly. I'm told it refers to some hill goddess. The locals are always full of such superstitions.

Construction is proceeding well. A new library is going up near Observatory Hill—splendid Gothic lines. I had a most disagreeable incident yesterday with one of the labourers—he stumbled across the lawn with a basket of bricks and quite ruined the view. I've sent a note to the Public Works Department to ensure better discipline. These people mean well, but they have no sense of order.

It does weigh on me, sometimes, how much we ask of them. But then again, we bring railways, schools, law—surely it is a fair trade. They are children in need of structure, Edith. We civilised them. It is a burden, yes, but also a kind of calling.

I miss your voice in the evenings. Please give my love to Margaret and tell Cook to send more of the Darjeeling tea—I find I've developed quite a fondness for it here.

Ever your loving,
Edward

6

The Coolie's Back

Simla's avenues gleamed with order, its chalets framed in rose and ash, its English lawns rising like manicured flags of conquest. But beneath the gravel paths and ornamental hedges, a quieter infrastructure bore the true weight of empire: backs bent low, knees worn to bone, voices seldom raised. These were the coolies, the ayahs, the pankhawallas —the invisible caste of colonial comfort.

They carried not just goods, but empire itself.

To walk through Simla in the early 1900s was to enter a mirage built on exhaustion. The Governor-General's piano. The Viceregal Lodge's sandstone. The crates of Bordeaux and Royal Doulton. All ferried, sometimes on foot, sometimes slung from rope and pole, up the narrow switchbacks of the hills.

From the Shivalik foothills and the deeper valleys of Kangra and Kotgarh, they came—some by need, others by coercion, under the cruel mandate of begar, the forced labor exacted first by hill rajas, then perfected by the Raj. Their labor was cheapened by caste, obscured by policy, and denied by polite fiction.

In their own words:

“We are not men here. We are instruments.”

This was not metaphor. Their bodies were tools—replacing oxen, replacing wheels, replacing anything that might threaten British aesthetics with the sight of burdened animals in leisure towns. So it fell instead to human limbs.

They slept in squalid quarters beneath the Ridge, where drains overflowed and diseases lingered. A man might wake with leeches on his feet, eat a meal of gruel, and spend the day hauling brass bathtubs uphill while being slapped for slowness.

The ayah, who cradled the Sahib’s child through fever and tantrum, watched her own child grow thin in a distant village. The pankhawalla, whose arm moved in ceaseless rhythm to cool a bureaucrat’s brow, overheard the secrets of empire but was permitted no language with which to speak them.

Excerpt from a Hidden Diary (c. 1910)

The bird sings from the wire outside the barracks. It sings of blue sky. I look up. My brother still coughs blood from the stone dust. The Sahib says the new road is too slow. But how does a man lift a stone larger than his dreams? Today we must carry the piano to the Ridge. It weighs more than my village. But we will carry it. We always do. What else is there?

To the British, such lives were faint background noise—necessary but interchangeable, noble in their suffering or conveniently forgotten. But beneath the silence, discontent gathered like thunder behind the hills.

Then came 1925.

Jagesar was one of hundreds of rickshaw coolies, his name no more familiar than the wheel he pulled. One night, while waiting outside the residence of Controller of the Army Canteen Board, Major Mansel-Pleydell, Jagesar fell asleep. He was exhausted, as any man might be.

What followed was the usual cruelty—but this time, it was seen.

The officer, enraged at the coolie's rest, beat him savagely. Kicks to the chest. Abuse flung like stone. Jagesar died shortly after of internal injuries. His death might have passed unnoticed, absorbed into the grey of Simla's uncounted dead. But something shifted.

Rai Bahadur Lala Mohan Lal—an early nationalist, once aligned with Gandhi—refused to let the matter rest. He demanded a case. He forced open the doors of justice with quiet insistence.

Word spread: They have named it. They have named the violence.

What followed was not a riot but a refusal. Coolies left their rickshaws idle. Porters stopped climbing. A silence fell across the Ridge—not of submission, but of collective will.

The British, who had mastered Simla's altitude, suddenly found themselves without traction.

Mansel-Pleydell was tried, convicted, sentenced to eighteen months in jail. He appealed. He lost. In prison, he took his own life.

The ruling sent shockwaves through the corridors of power.

"Half of Simla salutes an Indian!"

—scrawled in chalk, whispered in bazaars, stitched into resistance.

This was no longer just a hill station. It had become a crucible—where the invisible rose and the weight of centuries briefly shifted. Jagesar's death was not the end, but the moment Simla's foundation cracked. Behind every bungalow's façade now stood the memory of his back.

And though the empire endured, something sacred had been named again: that even an instrument, if broken unjustly, will echo with the sound of justice.

A Grandmother's Lullaby for Jagesar

(Passed from grandmother to granddaughter, sung low under the stars with a brass lota beside the fire.)

"Chup ho ja, mere laal,

Chup ho ja, and listen –
Jagesar bhaiya now sleeps in the mountain mist.
The rickshaw wheels are still, the whip is gone,
And no Sahib can chase him anymore.

We wrap his name in cotton and ghee,
Place it beside the tulsi tree.
Say his name when the jackal cries –
Say his name when the wind forgets.
He fell, but he rose in us.
Sleep now. Let his strength be your spine."

(Later verses are forbidden to outsiders. They contain names, directions, rituals of reversal.)

Diary of Miss Annabelle Royston, Nurse, Viceregal Clinic (July 6, 1925)

"I oughtn't be writing this, but my hands won't settle otherwise. The boy died last night. Jagesar, they say. A coolie – rickshaw puller. No one gave him water. They say he was kicked, and badly. Mr. Pleydell, they whisper. I do not know.

What I do know is that when they wheeled his body into the lower dispensary, every porter turned their face to the wall. One wept silently into the folds of his turban.

I have stitched wounds before. I have heard sobs muffled by loyalty or fear. But tonight, Simla itself feels disjointed—like a dollhouse dropped too hard.

I am supposed to tend to the Viceroy's wife tomorrow. My uniform is clean. My conscience less so.

I miss my mother. I miss Birmingham fog. I miss believing in our mission."

Voice of the Ridge

(Personified reflection of Observatory Hill, Ridge Road, and the silent stones beneath.)

I am older than their boots.
Older than their rail and mortar.
Before their flags and parades, I was sky-touching silence.

Then they made me their capital.
They broke my skin to build steps and clubs,
Threaded wires through my ribs,
Poured liquor down the throat of my streams.

Jagesar passed over me many times.
His sweat salted my slopes.
The wheels of his rickshaw engraved thin prayers into my dust.

When he fell, I felt it –
Like a snapped cartwheel,

Like the thunder that precedes landslides.

And when the coolies stood still,
I remembered my stillness.
When they refused to bow,
I remembered the trees they had cut to make their courts.

I am the ridge.
I carry memory longer than stone can stand.

Letter from Mansel-Pleydell to His Wife, Agatha

(Sent weeks before the fatal night, written from an estate bungalow above the Mall.)

My Dearest Agatha,

Simla remains a temperamental mistress. Beautiful, yes—but prone to idleness and rot. The rains have set in; the clouds hang like dirty linen over these blasted hills.

The natives grow more insolent by the day. Rickshaw men loaf about. The bearer has developed an annoying twitch. Discipline is sorely lacking.

There is talk among the liberal sorts of "dignity for the working man." They do not see, as we do, the natural hierarchy of things. Order must be maintained. These fellows are not accustomed to liberty; it disorients them.

I miss your presence. Tell little Edmund his father continues to hold the line.

Ever yours,
Mansel

7

The Gods Awaken

The British came with ledgers in their hands and laws in their mouths. They believed power lay in paper, parade, and Parliament. They measured loyalty in rupees and rifles, and mistook silence for submission. But in these highlands —where cedar roots clutch the bones of ancestors, and

winds carry memory from peak to peak—power resided elsewhere.

In the Himalayas, power was older than the Crown. It lived in spirit, in shrines nestled beneath overhanging cliffs, in the oaths whispered to deotas before planting, before marriage, before war. It pulsed through the drums of ritual nights and the stillness of first snow. When men became unjust, it was said, even the gods would turn their faces. And when the violation was deep enough, the mountains would stir.

The killing of Jagesar, a rickshaw puller whose back bore the weight of a town's leisure, was not merely a crime of flesh and bone—it was an act of adharma, a rupture in the cosmic fabric. The sahibs, in their tall hats and tight routines, may have thought him a nameless native—but the gods knew his name. And the people, who remembered how to speak to those gods, knew what must follow.

What arose in the aftermath was not only outrage, but dum—an ancient form of resistance, reborn. Once, in the old hill polities, a community would withdraw its consent from an unrighteous ruler—not with arms, but by silence and refusal. No drumbeat, no labour, no food. The sacred audit. In Jagesar's name, that spirit returned.

There were no printed posters, no union brass. But the bazaar grew quiet. Rickshaws stood still, unpulled and unsummoned. The Mall, polished and performative, echoed strangely without footsteps. The grand bungalows looked out upon an absence they could not name. The coolies, the ayahs, the water-carriers, the sweepers—the

entire invisible infrastructure of colonial Simla—simply stopped. The British, at last, were made to see the machinery behind their leisure. And the gears had ground to a halt.

Voices from the Bazaar: Whispers of Reckoning

"They think we are only backs. But our backs remember. And our gods have memory longer than theirs." — An elder porter, lighting incense before his shiftless cart.

"They built their houses high—but forgot the mountain can speak." — A chai-wallah, pouring silence into clay.

"When a just man dies wrongly, the river refuses to flow straight. That is the old way." — A grandmother, eyes on the horizon.

It was Rai Bahadur Lala Mohan Lal, quiet in demeanour but uncompromising in his conscience, who first broke the imposed stillness. He did what no one else dared—he named the wrong aloud. He filed a formal complaint. The effect was immediate. The murmur of grief became a chorus of defiance.

This was no longer a solitary mourning. The strike was total, spiritual, seismic. Simla's colonial mirage cracked. The British, so sure of their control, discovered that the

heart of their hill kingdom beat not in the Viceregal Lodge, but in the tired hands of those who carried its burdens.

The refusal to labor was not merely economic—it was ritual, almost liturgical. In ceasing to bear the weight of others, the coolies were declaring: You have violated the sacred trust. You have taken too much. You do not see us, but the gods do. And they are watching. Jagesar, now an ancestor, moved through the town like a wind no bungalow could block.

When the trial came—and with it, the impossible conviction of Mansel-Pleydell—it was nothing short of an earthquake in the colonial psyche. A sahib had been held accountable for the death of a coolie. It had never happened before. Perhaps, they whispered, the British were no longer gods.

The phrase spread like wildfire through the bazaar:
"Half of Simla salutes an Indian."

It became more than slogan. It was a ritual utterance, half blessing, half rebellion. It named a shifting order. Not just for Jagesar, but for every unseen labourer whose sweat had been taken without thanks. The moral scaffolding of Empire had been weighed—and found wanting.

In the stories that spread later, they said the deotas had been stirred from their slumber. That the Ridge itself had spoken. That a mountain god had stepped lightly down into a chai-stall, into a grandmother's lullaby, into the silence of a standing rickshaw—and stayed there, waiting.

The gods had awakened.
And the audit had begun.

Dream-Fragments from the Ridge

From the Journal of Major-General C.D. Fortescue, Ret.

July 19, 1925 — Viceregal Lodge, Simla

"I dreamt again of the rickshaws—not moving, just waiting. Empty chairs under a moonless sky. Each one facing my door. No drivers, yet I heard their breathing. Soft, rhythmic, like distant drums. I awoke drenched, my boots missing from their rack. I have asked the bearer to sprinkle Gangajal on the threshold."

Torn Page, Unsent Letter from Lady Araminta Wexley to her sister in Surrey

"Dearest Bea,

It is all rather unnerving. Even the cook is speaking less. There's a smell of camphor and smoke at odd hours. Yesterday, I saw a coolie looking directly at me. Not through me, mind you—but at me, as though I were something fragile. Something... borrowed. I've told Edwin to cancel the garden party. I find myself strangely unable to descend the Mall."

Fragment from a Dream Interpreter's Log, Local Darbar Records (Translated)

"The White Ones say they see jackals in mirrors. One dreams his shoes walk without him. Another says her parasol opens of its own accord in moonlight. They whisper of rivers that run backwards. Of servants with golden eyes. They call these dreams 'nonsense,' but they do not sleep again."

Memo from Superintendent Charles Whitehall to Simla Police HQ

"It has come to my attention that several memsahibs report auditory disturbances—bells, low chanting, whimpering children. These are almost certainly symptoms of collective fatigue or possible malingering. Please instruct constables to investigate the local temple activity near Jakhoo Hill, though discreetly. We must not incite superstition. Especially our own."

Field Note from a Junior Civil Servant, Anonymous

"They say when the coolies stopped working, time itself slowed. I laughed at first. But last Thursday lasted three days. My ink won't dry. I passed the same beggar thrice on the same corner, same gesture, same crow. I think the Ridge is… folding inwards."

Half-Burned Sermon from Christ Church, Recovered from the Hearth

“We speak of dominion and stewardship—but perhaps we have mistaken the map for the land. The Lord’s silence in these hills is not abandonment. It may be a reprimand. Do not mistake order for justice, nor quiet for peace. The people are not ours. Nor are these gods asleep.”

Entry from the Confidential Diary of Lord Ingram-Hayes, Assistant to the Governor-General

“Is it possible for a nation to be unseated by a silence? The real terror is not rebellion—it is indifference. That they no longer wish to speak to us. That they speak only to something older. Something that does not answer in English.”

These fragments mark the moment when the Empire began to dream against itself—when the masters of Simla found themselves wandering, ghost-like, in a city they thought they owned. Their grip loosened not with the clang of weapons, but with the quiet refusal of the mountain people. A refusal older than any law they had brought with them.

The Gods Remember

From the Mouth of an Ayah, Whispered at Dusk

"The memsahib's child sees them first—white shapes at the window, asking for names. But we do not speak the names. We hum instead. Old songs. To remind the bones who they belong to."

Night Chant from Below Jakhoo Temple

Dum nikla hai, chhaya gir gayi,
Pahadon ne raat pe pehra diya.
(The breath has departed, shadow has fallen. The mountains stand guard through the night.)

Sun lo devi, jagesar ki kahani,
Haath na uthaya, par paap dekh liya.
(Listen, O Devi, to Jagesar's tale—he raised no hand, but the sin was seen.)

Dream-Song of a Rickshaw Puller, Half-Remembered in Fever

"I dream I pull the gods themselves—nine of them, heavy as stone, their eyes open. They ask no fare. Only witness. I pull them through Simla. Not a soul sees them but the crows. The Ridge bows. The Sahib weeps."

A Lullaby from a Coolie Woman to Her Son

Soti reha pahadon da maan,
Uthi jaave jad hon da ghaav lage.
(The mountain's pride sleeps, child—
but it rises when the wound is deep.)

Temple Bell Ledger, Jakhoo Devi Shrine (local notation, recovered in the 1970s)

Night of July 20, 1925: Bells rang without hands. Three times. Windless. Priest did not sleep. Said he saw a man with broken feet kneel before the Devi. No footprints on the stone. Only blood. Very little blood. But very red.

From the Mouth of a Bazaar Elder, Spoken to a Grandchild

"The sahibs came with rifles and bricks. But the land listens only to breath. When Jagesar died, the soil drank it in. That blood grew teeth. It is patient now. But it remembers who walked on its back and who was dragged."

A Dream Recounted by a Young Pankhawalla

"I saw the Ridge turn upside down. The white bungalows floated like paper boats, and below them, in the roots, were all the dead names. Some rose. Some waited. One held a torch."

These counter-fragments do not demand justice in English. They are not demands at all. They are the world turning, ever so slightly, toward balance. The mountain speaks not in decrees, but in weather. The gods do not shout; they withdraw their silence. And in that silence, a reckoning ripens.

8

The Price of Adaptation

They did not always come with guns.
Sometimes, they came with treaties.
Ink flowed instead of blood—at first.

This was the quieter conquest. Clause by clause, sanad by sanad, the ancient sovereignties of the hills were unstitched. Rajas, Ranas, Thakurs—those once anointed in temple oil, chosen by the counsel of elders and the will of deotas—now signed parchments in languages not their own, affixing royal seals to documents that praised their "loyalty" even as they nullified their lineage.

The British called it Paramountcy—a word both sonorous and sterile. In practice, it meant submission. It meant that a Raja could still sit upon his throne, but only so long as he bowed to another. No war without permission. No foreign alliance without clearance. No heir without approval. A sovereign in name. A clerk in action.

In the beginning, some hill rulers believed they were playing a clever game—aligning with the British to ward off the encroachments of Sikhs, Gurkhas, or rival kingdoms. The Company men seemed urbane, strategic, distant. But distance soon shortened. A summer capital needed timber. A military cantonment needed labor. The hills, once

deemed peripheral, became crucial: as buffers, as backdrops, as reservoirs of quiet obedience.

And the terms—oh, the terms—they were always written in velvet:

Excerpt from a Bashahr Sanad (c. 1839)

"The said Raja, for himself and his successors, shall remain in constant alliance and firm attachment to the British Government… and shall furnish such aid in men and resources as the Government shall from time to time require…"

It sounds like partnership.
It was servitude.

In Bashahr, the transformation was swift and devastating. The deodar forests—once sacred, once grazed by herders who whispered prayers into the bark—were now "assets." Their worth counted not in stories but in board-feet. Forest officers replaced forest spirits. The Raja gave permission, but the contracts came from Simla. His signet seal echoed with hollowness.

Even the rituals changed. The gods were still invoked, but now under the shadow of the Union Jack. A Raja might ride an elephant at Dussehra, but his protocols were choreographed by a Political Agent. His court still met, but the judgments were reviewed by the Deputy Commissioner.

His ministers still wore turbans, but they took notes in English. In this theatre, sovereignty became costume.

A Raja's Lament (Interior Monologue, 1911)

My ancestors wrestled demons; I negotiate with surveyors.

They ruled by dharma; I rule by circulars.

They poured ghee into sacred fire; I pour Scotch into cut glass.

I am addressed as "Your Highness," yet I bow to a pale boy in khaki who mispronounces my name. He decides my stipend. He rewrites my border.

I still wear the crown—but it is a crown that fears itself.

Sometimes, in the silence of dusk, I hear the bells from the old temple calling. Not for prayer. For reckoning.

Some rulers sent their sons to English boarding schools. They returned speaking clipped vowels and quoting Tennyson, unsure whether they belonged in the palace or the club. They played polo with the colonel's daughter and chanted mantras at their grandmother's feet, never quite fluent in either world.

And always, hovering in the background, was the Political Agent—half diplomat, half warden. He sat at the

edge of every durbar, his presence both unspoken and absolute. A small nod from him could unlock a subsidy. A frown could end a dynasty. This was no longer kingship. It was caretaking—of colonial order, under the guise of continuity.

An Anglo-Indian Nurse's Diary, Dagshai (1914)

"The Rajas come for inspection today. The hospital was cleaned twice over. A scrawny one from Bilaspur gave a speech in English that he barely understood. The Colonel said, 'He does well for a native prince.' It made me ill. One of the coolie boys fell during the parade and wasn't treated till the guests had gone."

What did it cost, this adaptation?

It cost language—replaced by memoranda.
It cost ritual—replaced by reception.
It cost forests, watersheds, temples, stories.

And above all, it cost the quiet dignity of rule by one's own people, in one's own name.

The gods who once dwelled in caves and groves grew silent. Or perhaps not silent—just unheard, beneath the rustle of papers and the ticking of English clocks.

When independence finally came, some Rajas celebrated. Others wept. For they had long ago bartered their power for survival. Their palaces, preserved, were now hotels. Their sons, civil servants. Their banners, artefacts. The flame had not been extinguished, but it had been trimmed to a wick, kept alive not by sovereignty, but by nostalgia.

The Bard's Song to Shyamala Devi

(Passed down in fragments; sung softly at twilight by temple musicians long after the courts fell silent)

O Devi of dusk and mountain flame,
Shyamala, crowned in cloud and rain–
Where are the kings you once anointed,
With garlands of pine and blood untainted?

They bowed to fire, not pen or stamp,
Their words were oaths, not postal camps.
But now their robes are stitched in shame,
Their thrones embossed with someone else's name.

You gave them wind, you gave them stone,
You carved your will in rock alone–
But now they sit in velvet halls,
While Simla drinks from your sacred falls.

Awaken, Shyamala! Dream once more–
The crown is cracked, the mountain sore.
Let not the line of rivers end,

Call forth a king the hills defend.

The Djinn in the Deodar

A folk tale from Rampur, retold by a grandmother during a winter vigil

There was once a Raja, proud and wise, who ruled a forest-ringed valley blessed by rain and song. One day, a British sahab came bearing gifts and maps, speaking of railroads and rifles, treaties and “peace.” But the Raja, wary of trickery, went instead to the oldest tree in the deodar grove and summoned the colonial djinn said to slumber beneath its roots.

The djinn rose, wearing a red coat and spectacles, his smoke-skin marked with stamps and seals.

The Raja said, “Tell me, O spirit, what will I gain if I sign this paper?”

The djinn replied, “You will keep your palace. You will have mirrors and horses. You will be called ‘His Highness’ and invited to dine.”

“And what will I lose?”

The djinn’s grin grew wide. “Only the right to decide. Only the silence of your forests. Only the prayers of your ancestors, who will no longer recognize you.”

The Raja signed anyway. For the djinn had whispered of a cannon waiting in the gorge.

And from that day, the deodars stopped whispering his name.

Confidential Letter from Political Agent H.T. Welling to Lt. Col. Blackridge

(Private Correspondence, Simla Residency, 1884)

My Dear Blackridge,

Yesterday's durbar was, as expected, a splendid bit of theatre. His Highness of Jubbal paraded his silk and silver before our delegation like a cat showing off feathers he didn't catch. He performed his loyalty with such touching eagerness, one almost forgets he now requires our sanction to marry off his third son. His courtiers bowed lower than their spines could bear, and yet not one among them could account for the missing timber quotas this quarter.

It's quite something to see a man dressed in ancestral pride asking permission to light his ceremonial fire. They speak of lineage, of divine right, yet scramble to sit closest to the Assistant Collector at dinner. Empire, dear fellow, is not built only on conquest—but on softly leashed vanities, inked delusions of grandeur, and very agreeable wine.

With amusement and affection,
—H.T.W.

9

The Transfer

The hour struck midnight, and a vast, ancient land exhaled.

Down in Delhi, the sky shimmered with the cries of freedom.

The Union Jack slipped down its mast, and the tricolor rose—saffron, white, green—trembling in the monsoon air.

Nehru's voice, clear and solemn, carved itself into history:

"At the stroke of the midnight hour..."

A nation was born, or reborn—depending on which thread of time you chose to follow.

But in Simla, where the wind moves slower through the deodars and memory lingers in the bark, it was not quite so simple.

The dawn of independence did not arrive like a rupture. It arrived like a rehearsal with new costumes.

The colonial spell had been broken, yes—but the stage remained, and so did many of its actors.

The British left—but they left with remarkable tidiness.

They left behind a full kit: an entire civilisational infrastructure of rule.

District offices and revenue maps. Police codes and prison manuals.

Steel filing cabinets, still warm from a hundred years of rule.

Everything in place—except the accents.

The new leaders, many in homespun cloth, took their seats in leather chairs designed for their predecessors.

They spoke of swaraj, of self-rule, of a just future.

But the machinery they inherited had been built not to serve, but to extract.

Gandhi—Bapu—had dreamed of village republics, hand-spun dignity, and non-violence as a civic creed.

But dreams, it turned out, were ill-suited to blueprints.

He could shake an empire, yes, but not engineer a bureaucracy.

The state that emerged after independence was forged not in the spinning wheel, but in the steel mills of political necessity.

So it was Sardar Patel—the Iron Man—who took the helm in shaping the practical skeleton of the new republic.

It was he who drew princely lines into a new federation.

It was he who sent messengers, envoys, and if needed, troops—persuading, pressuring, sometimes simply absorbing.

Even the highland thrones of the Himalayas were folded into the map with signatures and sealed envelopes.

The Rajas who had once sipped sherry with Viceroys were asked, politely but firmly, to sign their legacies away.

They called it an Instrument of Accession.

A fine phrase for what it was: the last act of a very old play.

Nehru, meanwhile, stood tall at the podium, a bridge between Oxford and the Ganga.

He dreamed of a scientific temper, of dams as temples, of steel as salvation.

But sometimes he missed the soil beneath the engineer's boots—the grief of the displaced, the disillusion of the village.

He built a nation with great vision, but on foundations poured by the Empire.

An Advertisement for the New India (circa 1952, satire scribbled on the back of a tea stall calendar):

"INDEPENDENT INDIA: Now with More Paperwork!"

Enjoy all the thrill of self-rule—with none of the efficiency!

Same queues, same stamps, same surly clerk—now with added patriotism!

Don't worry—your file will still travel across four desks before being lost forever.

New nation, same great bureaucracy!"

But perhaps the most remarkable continuity of all was found not in Delhi, nor in the old Viceregal lodges, but down in the folds of the hills—in the rhythms of local power.

The Ledgermen did not disappear.

They evolved.

The sharp-tongued accountant who once greased colonial contracts now wore a khadi jacket and carried a party flag.

He had learned a new grammar: votes instead of favours, speeches instead of receipts.

He was now the Thakur MP, a figure equally at ease at a parliamentary debate or a village feast.

His skill was not ideology—it was negotiation.

He knew which caste alliance could swing a seat, which irrigation project could yield votes.

He no longer flattered a British Political Agent.

He flattered the electorate.

Or, more precisely, the idea of the electorate.

Development had become the new currency.

A school here, a road there.

A health centre that may or may not function.

The old networks—of land, of lineage, of quiet pressure—remained.

Only the tools had changed: zoning laws replaced bribes, government tenders replaced backroom favours.

The room of power had been redecorated, not demolished.

And so the Transfer, for all its ceremony and pageantry, revealed itself to be less a clean handover than a careful sleight-of-hand.

The architecture of power remained stubbornly familiar.
The ridge still echoed with official footsteps.
The hill-town still carried its colonial posture, even as the portraits in the council hall changed.

Simla, now the capital of a new Indian state, played its role once more.
The backdrop was the same. The script had new lines.
But the old story—a story of power layered upon power, of continuity masquerading as change—still hummed beneath the stage-boards.

And the deodars watched, whispering to one another.
Freedom had come.
But so had its shadow.

The Displaced Raja (Diary Entry, 1948)

Darbar Hall, Now Bare

"The khilats are gone. The drum no longer sounds at sunrise. Yesterday, the District Collector came to inventory the chandeliers. I offered him saffron tea; he declined. The ayahs have left. The dogs bark at unfamiliar feet. I still rise at dawn, as my father did, perform my puja, touch the earth with my forehead. But this earth no longer recognises

me. The papers call me a ‘former ruler.’ I correct them: I am the last one who remembered how to listen to this land.”

The Village Schoolteacher (Letter to Her Sister)

“The children still write ‘Queen Victoria’ in the margins of their copybooks. I gently cross it out and say, ‘Try Nehru.’ Some do, some don’t. We have a new flag, but the textbooks are full of old English rhymes. I asked for chalk; the block office sent a memo. I asked for a map of India; they sent a torn globe. Still, yesterday a boy asked me what a republic means. I told him: It means one day, he might not need my permission to dream.”

The Cynical Ledgerman Turned MLA (Statement to a Journalist)

“Back then, we wore woollen suits for the sahibs. Now we wear khadi for the voters. Don’t be fooled—the threads change, not the weave. I knew how to whisper into a tehsildar’s ear; now I whisper into a district officer’s. Loans or roads—it’s the same skill: knowing whose feet to touch, and whose file to lose. You call this democracy. I call it the long game of receipts. And brother, I’ve got them all.”

The Wistful Clerk (Typed Memo, Never Sent)

"To Whom It May Concern: The files are still here. The same blue folders, the same rusted clips, the same smell of dust and decisions deferred. The names at the top have changed, but the language inside is colonial still—impersonal, oblique, soaked in power. I joined this service to serve. I end each day aligning stamps. When they say 'freedom,' I look at my in-tray and wonder: for whom?"

Poetic Fragment – Ridge Chant, Anonymous, Circa 1950

The Union Jack came down with grace,
The tricolor rose in its old place,
But the windows stayed shut, the ledgers stayed locked,
And the mountain gods watched as the stations still mocked.

10

The Echo in the Hills

The wind still moves through the deodars—slow, steady, half-forgotten—as it has for generations. But now it carries new scents: pine needles bruised beneath bulldozers, exhaust smoke from scooters on roads once traced by imperial carriages. The hill speaks, still—but it must now raise its voice above the clamour of tourist horns, the shrill of shop signs, the click of camera shutters angled upward toward nostalgia.

The Raj's skeleton still lingers beneath the plaster. Bungalows once built for colonial comfort now wear coats of orange, turquoise, and pink—garments unsuited to their bones. The Mall still draws a crowd, but its processions have changed: no longer civil servants with monocles and

canes, but families with cones of soft serve, influencers with ring lights, lovers making TikToks where once only whispers dared echo.

And yet—look with a softer eye, and the past reveals itself not as a ghost, but as a companion shadow. Colonialism never left. It only changed shape.

The land remains contested. The maps drawn in British ink—distorted by revenue demands, ambition, and ignorance—continue to govern disputes over fields, forests, and sacred groves. The new India, so eager to pave its future, repeats old patterns with fresh vocabulary. Hydel projects, highways, smart cities—they bear the same logic of extraction, only now with a tricolour flag fluttering from the surveyor's Jeep. The same forests fall. The same rivers are harnessed. The same people displaced. And once again, the ones closest to the earth are the first to be pushed from it.

The coolies, the sweepers, the nannies—those who bore the weight of the Empire—have not vanished. Their descendants live on the edges still: in tin-roofed colonies, in shadow economies, in the aching backs of daily labor. They clear the trails, carry the loads, scrub the bedsheets of the very tourists who now come to play Sahib. The rickshaw coolie Jagesar may lie buried in archives, but the wound he bore remains open—bleeding quietly into the foundations of the hill's new prosperity.

And what of those silenced by Partition? Simla's Muslim artisans—tailors, cobblers, masons, and qawwals—once filled its by-lanes with language, song, and scent. Many left

when the country split along bloodlines. But some remained, holding on through quiet resilience. Their mosques still stand in the Lower Bazaar, half-obscured by hoardings, yet filled on Fridays with the murmurs of a past too vital to vanish. In their prayers, there is no nostalgia—only continuity. No bitterness—only presence. They are the remembered forgotten.

Even the deotas are not gone. The offerings come less often, the paths now marked by plastic wrappers and the flash of tourist lenses—but still, in secret, the bells are rung. The old rites continue, unrecorded. The sacred audit—dum—still stirs in village halls and protest marches, in petitions against quarrying, in bodies chained to bulldozers. The sense of a moral ecology, of a land that remembers and responds—that never left.

We have arrived now at the place beyond the story.

A Final Receipt

You have held these pages like receipts handed over generations:

—The whisper of gods in the oak leaves
—The crack of timber in a forest auction
—The calloused hands of a coolie
—The ledgers inked in both blood and aspiration
—The silence of a shrine razed for a parking lot

This has been a journey through Simla, yes. But more than that, it has been a meditation on how power arranges memory—on how forgetting, too, is an act of violence.

The hill knows. It has known conquest and contradiction, resistance and renewal. It has heard the hymns of pilgrims, the gunshots of British hunts, the weeping of those exiled, the laughter of those newly married. It has watched buildings rise and collapse. But it has never forgotten how to be still.

And that stillness—the Still Point—waits.

It waits beyond rhetoric, beyond flags, beyond archives.
It is the hush after the cloudburst, when the mist withdraws and the bones of the Dhauladhars stand bare and eternal.
It is the moment before history begins again.
It is inside you, and it is outside you.

A silence not of absence, but of attention.

This book does not ask you to agree. It invites you to listen.
To feel history as something more than chronology—something intimate, tender, unfinished.
To see the echoes as instructions.
To look at the land not as property, but as kin.

The ridge watches. The wind remembers.
The hill will rise again—not in anger, but in song.

And now, perhaps, so will you.

Invocation: Shyamala Devi's Blessing

In the language of cloud and river, I speak.
In the silence before speech, I dwell.
I am the first cedar. The shadow of your longing.
The breath in the stillness before the axe falls.

You walked my ridges.
You carved your names into the bark of my body.
You lit fires and forgot to bow.
Still, I waited. I wait still.

I was never only a goddess.
I was the contract of care.
The line between enough and too much.
The balance before every fall.

Let this record be a beginning.
Let the deodars remember your names in forgiveness.
Let the coolie's breath return as wind.
Let my name, once whispered in the old tongue,
rise again, unbroken, on a child's lips.

For those who listen, I am still here.
For those who offer nothing but presence,
I offer everything.

Come back to the spring.
Come back to the still point.
I am not lost.
You are not lost.

Final Echo: The Grandmother's Voice

Child, hush now.
The wind is older than history.
The hill keeps what the paper forgets.

I once sang you the song of Jagesar, remember?
Not for grief. For remembering.
I stitched that lullaby with salt and sandalwood.
So you'd know who you are
when the lights flicker and no one calls your name.

They changed the signs.
They widened the roads.
They drew their lines across our breath.
But the gods do not sign papers.
And the forest keeps score in roots.

When your children ask,
you tell them this:
We were never silent.
We were listening.
And the ridge—
the ridge still hears.

Sleep now. But dream with your ears open.
The land speaks back
to those who carry its story with care.

The Final Seal

ॐ पूर्णमदः पूर्णमिदम्
पूर्णात् पूर्णमुदच्यते।
पूर्णस्य पूर्णमादाय
पूर्णमेवावशिष्यते॥

Om. That is whole. This is whole.
From the whole, the whole arises.
When the whole is taken from the whole,
Wholeness still remains.

Thus ends the telling.

What was broken is not lost.
What was forgotten is not erased.
What was carried—on backs, in lullabies, in coins and treaties and chants—
now returns, not as burden,
but as offering.

You have walked the circle.
Simla is not just a place.
It is a remembering. A reckoning.
A return.

Let the hill rest now.
Let the reader bow.

And from the silence that remains,
may the whole speak once more.

Glossary of Terms: A Lexicon of the Hill and the Empire

Ahimsa (अहिंसा) - Sanskrit, Hindi

The principle of non-violence toward all living beings—more than just an absence of harm, it is a vow of reverence. Central to Jainism and resonant in Gandhi's politics, ahimsa infuses both everyday ethics and sacred commerce. In this book, it echoes in the conscience of the trader who remembers his soul.

Asura (असुर) - Sanskrit, Hindi

Mythic beings of great power—sometimes portrayed as demons, sometimes as titans, often misunderstood. In Vedic texts, Asuras are not evil, but opposed to cosmic harmony. Later traditions cast them as adversaries of the gods (Devas), yet their struggle speaks to the divided heart of empires and men alike.

Ayah (आया) - Hindi, from Portuguese

A native nursemaid or female servant employed in colonial households to care for British children. The ayah is both intimate and invisible, trusted and expendable. She moves between the nursery and the margins of memory—part of the emotional architecture of Empire, yet rarely its inheritor.

Begar (बेगार) - Hindi

Unpaid, forced labor extracted under threat or coercion. Once a village duty under kings, begar was weaponised by the colonial state for its roads, bungalows, and summer palaces in the hills. To walk the Mall in Simla is to walk on the bones of the nameless bearers of load and legacy.

Bhed (भेद) - Hindi

One of the four classical instruments of statecraft: Saam (persuasion), Daam (price), Dand (punishment), and Bhed—the strategy of division and secrecy. To deploy bhed is to know the fissures in men and kingdoms, and to widen them like cracks in Himalayan rock.

Coffin Beds

Narrow, stacked sleeping enclosures rented in hourly slots by the destitute in industrial Britain. They evoke the dark mirror of Empire: comfort in the colonies bought by squalor at home. To the working-class British subject, the Empire could be both escape and entrapment.

Coolie (क़ुली) - Hindi, from Tamil and possibly Chinese

A derogatory term for an unskilled manual laborer, especially from Asia. Under Empire, coolies were pressed into service—porters, bearers, rickshaw men, railway workers—shouldering the literal and metaphorical burden of colonial expansion.

Daam (दाम) - Hindi

Price, payment, or bribe. As a tool of diplomacy, daam means incentive—gold instead of gunpowder. The ledgers of the colonial brokers were filled not just with numbers, but with calculations of conscience.

Dand (दंड) - Hindi

Punishment or coercion, the third tool of governance. Dand is the lash, the fine, the show of strength. But in the hills, it could also arrive cloaked in law or couched in civility—force made polite.

Deota (देवता) - Hindi

A village deity or local god, often bound to a sacred grove, a spring, or a mountain ridge. Deotas are not distant—they speak through trance, dream, and storm. Their justice may override that of kings, and their silence is never neutral.

Dharma (धर्म) - Sanskrit, Hindi

Law, duty, rightness, the sacred order of things. Dharma is not dogma—it is the principle that sustains life and balance. A dharmic act harmonises personal desire with universal rhythm. A dharmic trade is one that leaves the soul unbroken.

Dhikr (ذكر) - Arabic

A devotional practice in Islam, especially in Sufism, involving the repetitive invocation of the Divine names. A breath, a heartbeat, a rhythm of remembrance. In the hills, the whirling zikr circles sometimes echoed the turning of Buddhist prayer wheels—different songs, same longing.

Drain Theory

An anti-colonial economic critique, first articulated by Dadabhai Naoroji, that argued India was systematically impoverished by British rule. Taxes, profits, and resources

flowed outward—while famine, debt, and humiliation remained.

Dum (दुम) - Pahari, from Sanskrit/Hindi 'dama'

A collective withdrawal of labor and presence—a sacred strike. Villagers would cease all activity and gather at a shrine, calling upon their deity to bear witness. It was protest as prayer, refusal as ritual.

Ledgermen

An archetype of the colonial intermediary: trader, contractor, or accountant who facilitated the machinery of rule. Some were shrewd opportunists; others reluctant collaborators. They operated in the shadow of Empire's glow—keepers of books and of secrets.

Mall (The Mall Road)

The colonial promenade—a stage for social theatre, gossip, and control. In Simla, The Mall was both mirror and moat, reflecting British leisure and insulating it from the native city below. Brown bodies could build it, but not stroll it freely.

Marwari (मारवाड़ी) - Hindi

A business community known for its mercantile acumen, originating in Rajasthan but spanning the subcontinent. In the colonial period, many Marwari families became financiers of railways, mines, and princely fortunes—traders of grain, gold, and governance.

Pandavas (पांडव) - Sanskrit, Hindi

The five heroic brothers of the Mahabharata, paragons of virtue and tragedy. In the high Himalayas, some believe they still wander as wind or stone. Their myths are local, living—etched into peaks, riverbeds, and the ethics of survival.

Pankhawalla (पंखवाला) - Hindi

A man whose duty was to pull the rope of the ceiling fan—the punkah—to keep the sahib cool. He worked behind the curtain, invisible and rhythmic. His was the hand that stirred the air of Empire.

Paramountcy

A doctrine by which the British Crown asserted ultimate authority over India's princely states, despite their nominal autonomy. It was sovereignty dressed in velvet gloves—treaties that offered honour, while binding with silk cords.

Pahari (पहाड़ी) - Hindi

Literally "of the hills." It refers to the people, dialects, and customs of the Himalayan foothills. Neither fully Sanskritic nor fully tribal, the Pahari world is syncretic, resilient, and woven with whispers of cloud and pine.

Palki (पालकी) - Hindi

A palanquin—a curtained litter carried on the shoulders of coolies. For the traveler, it was shelter and privilege; for the bearer, weight and wage. In the hills, the palki became a symbol of both passage and burden.

Princely States

Nominally autonomous territories ruled by Indian royals under British suzerainty. Over 500 such states dotted the subcontinent, some grand, some minuscule—each entangled in a web of ceremonial respect and real subordination.

Purohit (पुरोहित) - Sanskrit, Hindi

A family priest and ritual specialist. In royal courts, the purohit was both astrologer and advisor, officiant and archivist of lineage. In this book, he sometimes stands at the crossroads of power and prophecy.

Raj (राज) - Hindi

"Rule" or "sovereignty," but in this context, it evokes the British Raj—a century of governance wrapped in bureaucratic precision, social hierarchy, and the myth of permanence.

Raja / Rana / Thakur (राजा / राणा / ठाकुर) - Hindi

Titles for local rulers, varying by region and tradition. The hill states had their own aristocracy—often caught between ancestral pride and colonial pressure. These titles linger even after their kingdoms fade.

Saam (साम) - Hindi

The first and most preferred strategy in classical diplomacy—persuasion, advice, gentle appeal. In these pages, saam is the voice of the wise minister, the olive branch before the sword.

Sanad (सनद) - Persian, Hindi

An official deed, grant, or charter. Under British rule, sanads were legal instruments used to define the rights of princely states, often cloaking control in formality.

Sattva (सत्त्व) - Sanskrit, Hindi

One of the three gunas—the qualities of nature—alongside rajas (activity) and tamas (inertia). Sattva is clarity, harmony, and luminous balance. To see through sattva is to see the world not as it appears, but as it is.

Still Point

A metaphysical concept of inner stillness—the place beyond noise, narrative, or name. Whether in a yogi's cave, a Sufi's turning, or a moment of silent protest, the still point is where one meets the real.

Stithaprajna (स्थितप्रज्ञ) - Sanskrit

A person of steady wisdom—unmoved by sorrow or elation. The Gita holds up this state as the goal of spiritual maturity: to act without attachment, to see without distortion, to stand like the mountain in the storm.

Thakur MP

A composite figure in this book—descended from feudal lords, reborn as a democratic politician. The Thakur MP represents adaptation without transformation, continuity beneath change—a reminder that power mutates, but rarely vanishes.

Vairāgya (वैराग्य) - Sanskrit

The luminous detachment of the soul—neither indifference nor denial, but a freedom from grasping.

Vairāgya is the calm of the monk and the dignity of the hill elder who has seen kingdoms rise and fall.

Viceregal Lodge

The summer palace of the British Viceroy in Simla, now a university. Stone, oak, and Gothic ambition crown its halls. Here, men in frock coats redrew the fate of millions—with maps, cigars, and measured cruelty.